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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 000168

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TAGS: PGOV KISC KCRM I2  
SUBJECT: BAGHDAD AREA REACTIONS TO PRE-ELECTORAL  
DE-BA'ATHIFICATION

REF: BAGHDAD 0136

Classified By: Baghdad PRT Team Leader Tom Lynch for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) This is a Baghdad PRT message.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Two IFND (MP Salih al-Mutlaq's party) and one INM member of the Baghdad Provincial Council told the PRT January 18 that VPOTUS' engagement regarding the de-Ba'athification review of electoral candidates was welcome and the U.S. is right to support fair elections. They said the disqualification process was illegal. They see an Iranian hand seeking to prevent true elections. Baghdad local politicians appear to be polarized, with Sunnis interpreting de-Ba'athification as an effort to discourage Sunni voting. Most Shi'a contacts were supportive of the ban, saying that Ba'athists should not be allowed any role. Conversations so far suggest the effort to ban former Ba'athist politicians will not seriously impact Sunni turnout in Baghdad in the upcoming election and may even serve to galvanize Sunnis to vote. Sunni and Shi'a politicians alike believe that disgruntled Sunni voters will be galvanized to turn to Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyya Alliance. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

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MUTLAQ/ALLAWI PROVINCIAL COUNCIL ALLIES: CRITICAL  
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¶3. (C) Three Provincial Council (PC) members -- two from the Mutlaq's Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, Abbas Mahdi al-Hamdani and Isam Mustafa al-Shahiri (IFND), and one Falah Mahmud al-Qaisi (a Shi'a) who is a member of the Iraqi National Movement (INM) of Allawi ) criticized the disqualification of electoral candidates under the provisions of the Accountability and Justice Law to the PRT January 18 (reftel). al-Hamdani, a Sunni who ran on Mutlaq's ticket for the PC in January 2009 and now serves as the legal advisor to the PC, argued the entire process was illegal. He says the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC) is not legally empowered to make these findings as it had never been re-appointed by the Council of Representatives (COR). All three PC members endorsed the U.S. engagement on behalf of fair elections. While specifics on how exactly the U.S. should do this were thin, Hamdani told PRToffs that the remarks attributed to VP Biden in the Iraqi press were a big hit which sent the right signal at the right moment and got people on "the street" talking. The PC members said this was not about individuals, but about controlling the process. They also speculated that any prominent person in conflict with the Shi'a religious parties would be called a Ba'athist and disqualified.

¶4. (C) The PC members professed to PRToffs they had confidence in the Allawi-Mutlaq Iraqiya Alliance's chances, with or without de-Ba'athification. The politicians believe Allawi has extremely strong popular support, surprisingly even in areas like Sadr City. They feel also that "everyone

is fed up" with the big religious parties and their failure to deliver services. The politicians added that the attempt at de-Ba'athification appears to be Iran's attempt to prevent true elections from occurring in Iraq and thus create a failure of true democracy in Iraq. They repeatedly and explicitly linked the success of these national elections with the success of the democratic project in Iraq.

**¶15. (C)** The Baghdad PC members also noted that the de-Ba'athification process has the potential to spark violence. While all three members were at pains to explain why they utterly reject political violence, they are each from formerly "hot" areas and say that the reality is that some people will turn to violence to protest this, especially if the election is considered illegitimate. They observed to PRToffs that Iraqi officials who have supported democratic process throughout will be hurt by an illegitimate election, and noted that if democracy crumbles, they and others like them will have no place in Iraq.

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PROVINCIAL COUNCIL LEADERSHIP EXPRESS CONCERNS  
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**¶16. (C)** PC Chairman Kamil al-Zaidi, although a prominent member of the PM's Da'wa party, believes that the de-Ba'athification controversy is a destructive waste of time. He questions the timing, pointing out that many of those on the exclusion list have served in the GOI. The problem, as he sees it, is that the law is being twisted for political ends. In his opinion, "elections are like a garden and the citizens should be able to choose their own fruit."

**¶17. (C)** Dr. Riyadh al-Adhadh, Deputy PC Chair, is a long-time prominent Sunni politician from Adhamiyah. As a member of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), he is in direct competition for votes with the secular Mutlaq group. Despite this, he described the move as illegitimate and following "no parameters." He cited the number of sitting ex-Ba'athist CoR members and members accused of serious human rights violations. That said, he did not think that the disqualifications would delegitimize the elections or discourage voter turnout.

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BAGHDAD SUNNIS CRITICAL OF DE-BA'ATHIFICATION  
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**¶18. (C)** Sunni Qada (district) Council members told ePRT Team Leaders in Baghdad that de-Ba'athification will have a negative impact on the political process, national reconciliation, and the upcoming election. The Qada Council members accused the AJC of following the dictates of the GOI, "especially the Prime Minister." They indicated that if this is meant as a ploy to discourage Sunni participation in the elections, it will fail. Mutlaq's followers will turn to the Allawi's Al Iraqiya list. They also believe the Governments of Iraq and Iran are jointly responsible for politicizing the Ba'athist issue, and for seeking to push Sunnis out of the political process -- or at least to marginalize them. In that endeavor, a Sunni politician claimed, Shi'a politicians are cooperating with Kurdish politicians "because the Shi'a will give the Kurds what the Sunnis would not." In addition the Sunni politicians in Baghdad welcomed reports of Vice President Biden's recent engagement with senior GOI officials to oppose the disqualifications, and urged a sustained USG effort to oppose GOI efforts unfairly to disqualify candidates on political/sectarian grounds.

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SHI'A MAINLY SUPPORT DISQUALIFICATION  
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**¶19. (C)** In conversations with ePRT and PRT Baghdad team members, Shi'a politicians were generally but not unanimously supportive of the de-Ba'athification effort.

-- Abu Ammar, Mahmudiyah Qada Council Chairman, member of the Daawa party, stated that disqualifying Ba'athists is in the interest of the Iraqi people because allowing Ba'athists to participate in the process (or remain in office) allows them to "spoil" the process;

-- Abu Ammar added that Maliki is being unfairly blamed; members of his own State of Law coalition, such as Defense Minister Abdul Qadir al-Obeidi, had also been disqualified by the AJC. (NOTE: al-Obeidi was later removed from the disqualification list);

-- Yaqub Yusif al-Bakhati, Chairman of the Rashid District Council, a Shi'a, and a State of Law candidate advised the PRT that disqualification is a reasonable means to keep Ba'athists out of positions which they could use to subvert the political process as they seek to regain power;

-- al-Bakhati also indicated that banning Mutlaq will not seriously impact Sunni turnout as Sunnis have other options, including Allawi.

¶10. (C) Baghdad Mayor Dr. Saber al-Essawi, Shi'a (ISCI), told the PRT January 11 he knew Mutlaq in the nineties when he was "just a businessman." The Mayor expressed skepticism of Mutlaq's alleged Ba'athism. (COMMENT: The explanation may be complex but it is interesting that Baghdad's rival principal local leaders point the same way on Mutlaq. END COMMENT:)

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) These conversations do not suggest the effort to ban former Ba'athist politicians will seriously impact Sunni turnout in Baghdad in the upcoming election and may even serve to galvanize Sunnis to vote. Whatever the outcome of the effort to disqualify Mutlaq, his Sunni base in Baghdad Province will probably continue to support his Iraqiya alliance with Allawi; indeed, Allawi may now even gain votes in Baghdad from galvanized Sunni voters. END COMMENT.

HILL